

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell, February 3, 1877, with transcript

Letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his Father. Boston, Mass., February 3, 1877.

Dear Papa:

Your letter of the 26th ult. reached me on the 29th and came to me as a most welcome surprise with its enclosure of \$200.00 — indicating as it seemed to me a real wish to assist me in protecting my inventions abroad. I have met with so many disappointments in regard to these unfortunate foreign patents that I felt very grateful to you when your letter and draft made their appearance — for the whole thing seemed an evidence of kind feelings and parental affection.

What then was my surprise when the next mail brought me a letter from you so opposite in tenor to the first that it was difficult for me to realize that both letters were written by the same hand and upon the same day.

I answered at once in my usual impulsive way — but my good angel Mabel would not let me send my letter as it contained harsh words which should not have found their way into it. I accordingly acknowledged receipt of your cheque by telegraph — and have waited till now for the feeling of injustice created by your last letter to die away — but it is of no use — so I send this off without letting Mabel know anything about it and I only trust that she would not object to the wording.

I feel mortified in the extreme at the turn affairs have taken in regard to Visible Speech Types. I can recognize, however, 2 that the misunderstanding has been caused by unintentional forgetfulness on your part for which you are therefore not to blame — and which led you to use language about the matter that I cannot help feeling to be entirely undeserved.

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In the first place so far from having “advanced” me one cent on account of Visible Speech Types — I have always understood that I had been advancing money to Mr. Pinkert on your account . When I had advanced him \$110.00 I thought it best to refer him directly to you for the balance of his account — as I did not know what arrangement you had made with him about payment and I presumed that you would like to see the bill before paying it. In regard to my having anything more to do with the matter than to superintend the work — your letter conveys the first intimation of such a thing. I had told you again and again how crippled I had felt myself in my efforts to spread abroad a knowledge of Visible Speech on account of the want of proper types and I told you — after my engagement to Mabel — that I could no longer afford to devote all my income to advance the system — but I offered — if you would join me in procuring type to pay half the expense . You did not follow the matter up and I supposed you had forgotten all about it until your visit to Boston — when to my surprise and delight you voluntarily offered to supply me with the types for which I had been longing.

It was not my seeking — nor did I ask you to “advance” me a solitary cent for this or for any other purpose. I think you will do me the justice to say that I am not in the habit of begging from you or from any one else and I would not have accepted the loan had it been offered.

You have never assisted me to the extent of one cent in advancing your system here — but have left all expenses to me — so that when you offered to supply the types necessary to carry out the system — I was overjoyed beyond measure — for it seemed a proof of co-operation and interest in my work for which I could not feel too thankful.

Had I understood that I was running into debt for these types — not one would have been made. I do not wish to say a single bitter word concerning the matter — for I recognize that there has simply been a misunderstanding about the whole affair — only when you next desire to supply me with material for carrying out your invention here it will be well to have the arrangement in black and white so that you may not again call upon me to pay for your

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“gift” at a time when you know I want all my money for other purposes. I have told ever so many people of your generosity in supplying proper type to carry on the system, and I informed my normal class about the matter in your presence .

I shall return the \$84.35 at the earliest possible moment and shall pay Mr. Pinkert his bill if you will tell me how much I should pay — as I was not present when you made the bargain with his — and know nothing about the matter — beyond what you told me of the shapes of type, etc. when you asked me to 4 superintend the work.

Having dismissed this disagreeable and mortifying subject — I wish to say a few words about the condition of my affairs here — as you and Mama have evidently obtained the idea that everything is in a terrible “muddle” as you express it, and that my letter to you was intended as a begging letter to ask you to help your erring son “out of difficulties.” I wish, therefore, to correct the impression that I have any need to beg from anyone — for I have not. I have quite enough money coming in to pay all my expenses and just debts . I can also pay for my foreign patents if I choose to work for the money. As it is it would pay me better to borrow the money required at interest and devote the time that would have been occupied in private teaching to the completion of the telephone — for which we have offers from all parts of the country. My proposition to you was in the nature of a business arrangement — offering you a safe investment for your money — at the same time that the loan would have enabled me to devote every moment of my time to Telephony with the exception of one hour a day. I have taken the first steps towards protecting my invention abroad. I am naturally anxious that the money so expended should not be lost — but that my patents should be completed at once.

My Normal Class — (occupying one hour per day of my time) — will pay all my living expenses — but I shall have to accept private pupils in order to pay for foreign patents. It 5 so happens that all my telephonic affairs are now so near completion — that my time is more valuable than money — and I cannot afford to teach. I wished to hand over my

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private pupils to members of my normal class — and borrow from you at interest — the sum required for foreign patents.

I would rather however that my patents should stay as they are — that the money I have expended upon them should be lost — and that others should reap the benefits of my inventions — than that I should abstract an unwilling cent from your pocket — or that I should be considered as begging to you or to anyone else for assistance. Hence although I feel very grateful to you for your willingness to assist me when you think I am in distress I think it best under the circumstances to return your cheque and to rely upon myself alone.

I must thank you very much for having sent it — but I shall try to struggle along as best I can without borrowing from any one — even as a matter of business. If the worst comes to the worst my patents must just go.

With love, Your affectionate son, Alec. Prof. A. Melville Bell, Brantford, Ont.